Epilogue

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This book is an excellent collection of contributions on the life and experience of Maria Petyt and provides some fascinating new insights into this little known but important figure in Carmelite history and spirituality. The seven specialists provide many new details about the life of Maria Petyt and her spiritual involvement in the Dutch War. The Latin manuscript of her writings which she entrusted to the care of her spiritual director, Michael of St. Augustine, is published for the first time along with a translation. Unfortunately there are some missing parts and indecipherable words but the sense is clear. Other contributions describe some interesting parallels with and influences on the life and writings of Maria Petyt. Overall one is struck by the new light shed on Maria Petyt in these descriptions and interpretations. It seems worthwhile to highlight some of these new elements and to give an indication regarding possible further research.

Her Life and Her Prayer

Maria Petyt is an important figure in the history of Carmelite spirituality. She lived a profound life of prayer as a committed lay woman and lay Carmelite. She had a yearning for union with her Beloved (Jesus) from an early age and to dedicate herself to him in the religious life, although it is heartening to note that she also had the normal feelings of most young women. She could very easily have followed the path to marriage and family but circumstances shaped the direction of her life. A disease of the eye meant that she could not continue in the abbey of the canonesses she had entered but this disappointment did not deflect her from her dedication to God. She placed herself under an unknown Carmelite who had rather strict views. Then Michael of St. Augustine came on the scene and he seemed to suit her more as her spirit began to unfold and soar under his direction. Her bodily mortifications began to take a back seat and what came to the fore was her desire to be in union with God. Her devotion to Mary, the mother of Jesus, was profound, and she sought to reflect in her own soul the image of Our Lady by means of which motherly and compassionate qualities would shine out.

Michael of St. Augustine, who is himself an important figure, for his influence on the spread of the Carmelite 'strict observance', which eventually impacted the whole Order down to modern times, as well as his understanding of the 'mariaform' shape of the Carmelite life, was Maria Petyt's spiritual director for many years. It has long been wondered who influenced whom and in what direction. This book points us in a certain direction although more work remains to be done in this area.¹ In Esther van de Vate's chapter on Michael's redaction of the writings of Maria Petyt, she points out that 'the current image of Maria Petyt, from the point of view of historiography and spirituality, would have been radically different without the editorial work of her spiritual director Michael of St. Augustine'.

It is the hitherto undiscovered manuscript on the Dutch War which has caused a revision in the image of Maria Petyt and her relationship with Michael of St. Augustine. We discover for the first time her opposition to Jansenism and her political involvement through a profound prayer life. We discover also her sense of herself as a prophet and we see certain areas where she and Michael of St. Augustine may not have been in total agreement. There is ample room for further reflection on the relationship between the two and how each impacted the other's relationship with God. This book provides a solid base for further reflection.

Maria experienced great darkness at times when her spiritual exercises lost their attraction and she felt drawn to the 'Nothing'. Although the same term can be found in contemporary writings, it seems clear that Maria carried it to another level, which had little to do with external penances but instead reflected a profound love story between Maria and the Beloved. Her experience of darkness, when better understood through more profound research, will have an effect on sanjuanist studies in that she bears witness to the profoundly positive reasons for the dark night.² She believed that the darkness of the night was an opportunity to practice virtue. The experience, though intensely painful, was positive in that it was suffering borne for others to expiate their sins. The influence of her experience of the night on her concept of the 'Nothing' could contribute greatly to the study of the positive aspects of the experience of darkness on the spiritual journey.

These studies on Maria Petyt's life of prayer particularly during the Dutch War bring about a shift in her image also regarding the influence of women spiritual writers and thinkers in the Southern Netherlands of the 17th century.

1 Cf. Possanzini (1998) 158–170. Possanzini gives a good description of the spiritual relationship between the two.

2 Cf. Deblaere (1962) 169ff.

The biographical article written by Esther van de Vate, which focuses on the latter half of Maria Petyt's life, gives a lot of attention to her apostolic and visionary prayer within the context of the strict observance of the Flemish Carmelite Province.

A preview of a larger historical study on archival data concerning the community life of Maria Petyt is offered by Michel van Meerbeeck. In his article about daily life in Maria's hermitage, the Cluyse, the reader is informed about the order of the day and the main structures in this little community of tertiaries. The author derives his information from the hitherto unknown ordinances and other financial and notarial sources which add new knowledge to the study of the historical background of her life. These data are also important regarding the tensions that emerged within and around the young community.

The Manuscript

The postulator of the Carmelite Order, Giovanni Grosso, gives a detailed description of the manuscript called *Vita Venerabilis Matris Mariae a Sta. Teresia Tertiariae ordinis Bmae Virginis Mariae de Monte Carmelo*,³ which is of great value for the historical research on the spirituality and life of Maria Petyt. The history of this manuscript could provide us with important information about the problems Michael of St. Augustine might have faced during the editing process of her writings. Grosso concludes that further research on the manuscript, particularly when it is studied in conjunction or in parallel with the Flemish version, may offer interesting new information and useful clarifications regarding the experience of Maria Petyt.

In Esther van de Vate's chapter about Michael of St. Augustine's editing of the writings of Maria Petyt, she has found some interesting external references in the correspondence of Michael of St. Augustine, which made her reconsider his role. In response to the questions about why the Latin manuscript was never published and why the publication of the Dutch edition was delayed for several years, some scenarios are outlined. Van de Vate also examined to what extent the Roman anti-mystical turn could have influenced the edition of Maria's writings. She concludes that in the 1680s the reception of Maria Petyt's spirituality could have been far more sensitive than has been assumed till now.

3 Rome, Arch. Post. III. 70. (Curia Generalizia, Via Giovanni Lanza 138, 00184 Rome)

The Dutch War

Marie Petyt exercised a spiritual motherhood in regard to the Carmelites of the Belgian Province and then more widely for 'sinners', especially those involved in the Dutch war, who play such a prominent part in her own unedited writings. This is a completely new element in her spiritual physiognomy and one that is particularly studied in this book. As Veronie Meeuwssen writes in her chapter, this newly discovered text 'provides an opportunity to scrutinize her spirituality anew'. We have made a beginning in this book but no doubt future researchers and authors will also reflect on Maria Petyt's political involvement and how this affected her mystical relationship with Jesus or indeed how the relationship shaped her outlook on her world and its problems.

Maria was convinced that God was directing her to side with the French king particularly in his war in the Netherlands. She was also particularly concerned with the problem of Jansenism and its effect on the Church. Veronie Meeuwssen describes the process of discernment of spirits followed by Maria Petyt to decide whether some impulse was from God or not. Meeuwssen shows which criteria of discernment are used by Maria Petyt and that although Maria had great confidence in the direction of Michael of St. Augustine, whom she saw as a representative of God, she believed that in the case of the Dutch war she was directed by the Beloved himself.

Maria's role in the Dutch wars was to pray for the French king and his armies. She believed that he acted according to God's will and her whole focus was to do God's will in her own life. In Holland the Protestants had the upper hand and oppressed Catholics so she believed it was Louis XIV's intention to win back Holland for Christ and his Church. She also saw Jansenism as a dangerous heretical movement that was threatening the Catholic Church in the region. She believed that the French king was opposed to the heretical ideas. The Spanish king was also a Catholic and, according to Maria, should have been fighting on the same side as Louis. She looked upon both kings as her sons but favoured the French king as she believed that he was doing God's will. She was aware of the French king's scandalous life and she asked to take his sins upon herself so that he might focus on accomplishing his task given him by God.

Obedience came to be a problem for her though she always thought highly of this virtue but when her political leaders demanded that all religious in the area pray for the success of the Spanish king, she could not obey for she was convinced that the French king was in the right. Furthermore she was convinced that all the prayers of the other religious would not prevail over her poor prayers since God clearly desired the victory of the French king. She even clashed with and refused to follow her director, Michael of St. Augustine, to

whom she had pledged obedience, because she trusted her own inner experience.

Parallels and Influences

Esther van de Vate has an important chapter on the political and religious backdrop to Maria Petyt's life. The 17th century was a very violent and unstable time in Europe. The Peace of Westphalia in 1648, which put an end to the Thirty Years War, unfortunately did not ensure peace for long, and so we read of the warfare in the document on the Dutch War. The newly discovered document from Maria Petyt does show how her personal experiences were shaped by the larger historical context.

Van de Vate teases out the implications of the process of confessionalization and the impact of the Council of Trent, particularly on the Carmelite Order. The spirituality of the Order had a profound impact on Maria's spiritual development. Maria too had a profound impact on the spirituality of the Order, particularly on the development of the reform "strictior observantia". Van de Vate also shows how the redemptive prayer style of Maria Petyt was understandable given the Catholic culture in which she had been brought up. She also lived during the anti-Jansenist struggle and she was affected by the Jansenist view of Our Lady which she considered to be blasphemous.

The chapter by Mirjam de Baar on the comparison between Maria Petyt and Antoinette Bourignon shows Maria's translation of her inner experience into external action was not completely singular. De Baar points out that their lives until adulthood followed more or less identical paths although Bourignon ended up by leaving the Catholic Church. It seems that they did not know each other, yet they wrote their spiritual autobiographies at much the same time, while they were living in the same town, Mechelen.

It is clear that Teresa of Avila, and particularly the book of her *Life*, which was widely available to Maria and Antoinette, had a direct influence on Petyt at least, as was shown in the studies of Albert Deblaere, Teresa also seems to influence the writing of Bourignon. Another influence on both is Augustine's *Confessions*, which de Baar notes 'is regarded as a paradigm for the genre of conversion literature in western Christianity.'

Both Maria Petyt and Antoinette Bourignon claimed divine inspiration for their writings. However, women who claimed any sort of spiritual experience, particularly in the 17th century, were subject to mistrust and control in a male dominated culture. They had to have recourse to certain 'strategies' in order to be acceptable. In the case of Maria Petyt, her works were published posthu-

mously by her spiritual director, Michael of St. Augustine. In doing so he edited and contextualized them and it is principally due to this presentation that she has come down to us as a mystic. However the discovery of the hitherto unknown manuscript shows us another side of Maria Petyt. She, like Antoinette Bourignon, understood herself to be a prophet, even though she did not want Michael to publish her prophecies as long as she was living.

De Baar suggests some interesting directions for a future comparative study of Maria Petyt and Antoinette Bourignon in regard to the cultural context which nourished their spiritual ideas as well as the ideas themselves. Despite the fact that they took up opposing positions on the question of Jansenism, they did have a great deal in common. Never do they refer to each other in their known writings but it would be fascinating to discover if their paths crossed at any point or whether they knew of each other.

Elisabeth Hense points out in her chapter on the spirituality of Teresa of Avila and the manuscript of Maria Petyt about the Dutch War that the spirituality of Teresa 'permeates Maria Petyt's writings to such an extent that we cannot fully understand her autobiography and letters without knowing Teresa's main works. Teresa's legacy seems to be the key not only to Maria's Dutch writings but also to the Latin manuscript about the Dutch War.'

Basing herself on *The Interior Castle*, Hense shows that Maria Petyt filtered her experiences through the same levels of mental prayer as those explained by Teresa. In fact it was only when Maria studied the writings of Teresa that she began to understand and have confidence in her own experience. From the age of twelve, Maria 'enjoyed spending her time absorbed in God's presence'. Often the experience would last for two hours without fatigue and filled with a sweet love.

Maria felt an intense kinship with Teresa of Avila and took her name as her patroness when she committed herself to the Third Order of the Carmelites. Elisabeth Hense traces a number of parallels in the manuscript on the Dutch War with the later mansions of *The Interior Castle*. A more lengthy study of this aspect is called for and I am sure would produce some fascinating findings both for the understanding of Maria Petyt as well as for the reception and influence of Teresa's writings.

Anne-Marie Bos examines the recently discovered manuscript of Maria Petyt from the point of view of the prophetic vocation. She assumes that her formation in Carmelite spirituality, mediated by Michael of St. Augustine, since it is impregnated with the spirit of the Prophet Elijah, had a profound impact on Maria's self-understanding. Prophetic prayer was rooted in her inner life and initiated a thoroughgoing transformation process. Clearly Maria did not speak out publicly like the prophets of old. Instead her prayer was focused

on the desire that God's will be accomplished during the Dutch War. She clearly believed that her prayer was influencing and changing the world.

Future Directions

This book is a profound beginning of a study which will surely take us in a number of directions in the future. The new information gained on the personality and spiritual life of Maria Petyt is highly significant for understanding this figure who is gaining ever more respect as an important exemplar of the spirit of Carmel. Maria Petyt's experience has something to say about the history of the place of women in the Church and their impact on the major questions of their day. Her relationship, if any, with Antoinette Bourignon, and the spiritual currents of their day, in particular Protestantism and Jansenism, needs to be studied in greater depth and would surely produce some interesting findings. The impact of the Prophet Elijah on Carmelite spirituality in shaping its prophetic self-understanding has been taken a step forward by the discovery of the manuscript which reveals the involvement of this Carmelite woman in the political affairs of her day, even if only from afar, through her profound prayer. Finally, as we celebrate the 500th anniversary of Teresa's birth, we can see in the figure of Maria Petyt another example of how the Carmelite Order in all its manifestations took into itself the teaching and experience of the saint.

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